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Sidney B. Berry to Frank, 7 March 1963

Sidney B. Berry

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2706 Ridge Road Drive
Alexandria, Virginia
7 March 1963

Dear Frank:

Forgive me for having waited so long to answer your letters. I greatly appreciated your letters, the newspapers you sent, and being able to exchange telephone conversations with you that fateful weekend. And I was indeed sorry to learn that Louis has been penalized in his career. By now I hope that particular situation has been corrected.

Initially, lack of time was my reason for delaying an answer to you. From the narrow point of view of the office of the Secretary of Defense, crisis followed crisis with hardly a breathing spell in between.

But in all honesty, perplexity as to just how to respond to your letters has been the basic reason for my long delay. First, your letters made me aware that you and I were viewing the events of Oxford from differing points of view. Secondly, your letters contained what I believe to be errors of fact. Yet any immediate reply would have probably contained what appeared to be to you errors of fact. Thirdly and most importantly, I have had to think long and searchingly to get my own thoughts and convictions in order.

I feel that I can now state my own convictions sincerely and, I hope, clearly. And I can do this with full confidence that our friendship is firm and flexible enough to accept differences of opinion.

In viewing Oxford and all that it represents, I find that I must begin from certain basic convictions:

-- All men are equal in God's sight.

0- The statements of freedom, liberty, and political equality expressed in our Declaration of Independence, Constitution and other ^{basic American} documents are meant in a general sense, not in a restrictive sense.

-- My basic sense of right and wrong leads me to believe that all men have certain ^{inalienable} basic rights ^{which} and should not be jeopardized because of their race, creed, or color.

These beliefs lead me to the conclusion that segregation is wrong. I believe it wrong to deny to a man -- because of his color -- education, the franchise, justice in court, employment, food and drink, entertainment, a decent place to live, or the Word of God.

This seems to me to be the gut issue of segregation: is it right or wrong? My own answer is that segregation is wrong by standards of Christianity, the American promise and dream, and common justice.

It is from the standpoint of these convictions -- which I present to you neither dogmatically nor in an attempt to convince you -- that I view the Oxford situation. It naturally follows that I consider the actions of Governor Barnett and those who supported him as being wrong and tragic not only for Mississippi but for the entire United States.

You will recognize that the views which I now state are the logical conclusion of the direction in which I have been moving for some years. I am ashamed to say that it took the tragedy of Oxford to shock me into defining my convictions clearly. Being a native Southerner and, I hope, having some human understanding, I can appreciate the many problems which must be surmounted in doing away with segregation. I further realize that it is easier for me living the transient life of an Army officer to have reached my conclusions than if I had remained in Mississippi for life and still lived there with my family. I hope I would have reached the same conclusions; but in all honesty, I don't know if I would have or not.

It may be interesting to you to know that both Doug Kenna and Bell Wiley have reached essentially the same conclusions as mine. I have. They, too, are heartsick about the situation in Mississippi; and they, too, are sympathetic to the problems of those of you who must bring about a solution.

Again, Frank, my apology for having for having delayed so long in writing you, but I think you will understand the considerable soul-searching that I have gone through. I am confident that you, too, have been going through the same process. As I have ^{expressed} explained to you many times, I consider you and the men of your caliber to be the hope of the South in solving its grievous problems. I recognize that outsiders cannot solve the problem.

Anne joins me in sending our best to you, Mary and the boys.

Sincerely,

Sidney B. Berry

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